

DINKEY CREEK: A BRIDGE FROM PAST TO PRESENT

Early Resident And Explorers

For thousands of years, Indians have lived in the Sierra Nevada. Their trails continue to skirt the granite boulders of Dinkey Creek and wind through Blue Canyon, connecting villages on both sides of Sierra Nevada mountains.

The Western Mono tribe spent part of the year near Dinkey Creek. They hunted and fished in the fragrant forest, quiet meadows, and mountain streams. They chose the best sites for their summer villages. If you stop to enjoy a beautiful view today, you may be standing where Indian families once camped.

Early explorers and trappers like Jedediah Smith and his mountain men passed through the Dinkey Creek area in the late 1820's, but left little trace. In 1841, John Fremont led an expedition through the area. He wrote of an "assemblage of green pastures with varied flowers and scattered groves" along the North Fork of the Kings River.

Miners Stake Their Claims

In 1848, gold was discovered in California. Prospectors flooded west. Some made their way to Dinkey Creek to mine valuable ores, such as tungsten. Few in number, they never attracted the stage lines, stores and drinking resorts that served "boom towns" near richer claims. However, they still needed food. It's likely that four hunters were seeking fresh meat for the prospectors when they carved an area tree with their names and the note, "Killed 7 Bar, 23 Deer, August 1863."

Most mining claims around Dinkey Creek were worked briefly and then abandoned. A few merited more investment. For example, the Providence Mine founded in 1883, employed six miners at three dollars a day. The Wakefield placer mine lay to the southeast. Its owners built a company town called Russel Camp. A three-year old child who drowned in the mine's flume is buried in the small graveyard – a sad testament of the dangers of family life in such surroundings.

Here Come The Sheep

During the droughts of the 1860's, valley ranchers drove their sheep to the mountains to find forage. The Dinkey Creek area offered good grazing. Snowmelt turned the meadows emerald and decorated the rocky hillsides with brush. Because it formed a natural entrance to the mountain peaks, Dinkey Creek doubled as a holding area for herds traveling to and from higher pastures.

Ernestine Winchell wrote a history column for the Fresno Morning Republican in the 1920s and 1930s. She described massive sheep corrals along Dinkey Creek. They were "eight feet high, circular, to prevent packing and smothering in corners, of a size to enfold 2,500 to 3,000 sheep..."

About 180,000 sheep summered in the area in 1877. By 1891, 500,000 sheep grazed in the Kings River and Kern River drainages under the care of shepherds (usually Basque, French, Portuguese or Spanish with their trusty dogs. Competition for Sierra range was intense. Ranchers began to buy or homestead mountain land for their summer camp headquarters.

Frank Dusy, Colorful Historical Figure

Frank Dusy's life runs parallel to local history. This luckless miner turned sheepman brought his flock to Dinkey Creek in the early 1860's. He built a cabin in Dinkey Meadow in 1872. (It was destroyed by heavy snows in 1912.) Dusy hired Chinese herders, and by 1877, they were shearing over 73,000 sheep a year.

Frank Dusy was quite an adventurer. He filed for a petroleum claim, started gold and copper mines and traded horses from Nevada. He participated in irrigation ventures, was elected deputy sheriff and pursued outlaw Tiburcio Vasquez. Somehow, he found time to explore and photograph the magnificent territory between Dinkey Creek and the headwaters of the Kings River's three forks. He also guided pack tours from his cabin headquarters in the 1880's.

Shortly after Dusy arrived, this area got its odd name. According to local legend, a tiny dog named Dinkey bit a charging bear on the hind leg and hung on. Irritated, the bear turned and killed Dinkey with a swat of massive paw. This delay gave the dog's owner (or owners) time to snatch a rifle and shoot the bear. In one version of the story, Dinkey belonged to Dusy. In another, four local men owned him. But both accounts say that area landmarks- including Dinkey Grove (now call McKinley Grove) – were named in honor of this brave dog “no bigger than a rabbit.

Early Recreational Use

More people soon settled in the San Joaquin Valley. Families who could afford vacations escaped the summer heat by heading to Dinkey Creek. As Mrs. Winchell later wrote, some wives “were adventurous enough to brave a fortnight or more of ...riding their sidesaddles, cooking at campfires and sleeping in the open...there were evenings with bonfires and singing under silver firs.

The writings of Lilburne Winchell and W.W. Elliott attracted many tourists to the natural wonders of the Kings River country. Elliott advised travelers to come to Fresno by train. From there, wagons took them to Dusy's cabin in Dinkey Meadow via the Pineridge toll road.

With Dusy as guide, Elliott wrote, the boldest sightseers visited “the most rugged and yet the grandest and most sublime [country] in the State.” Three days on horseback brought them to “Alpine camp. From that point, the adventurous ones, carrying there blankets and provisions...[reached] Mt. Goddard and the Palisades...and the famous Tehipite Valley...”

Not all camping was so strenuous. In the summer of 1888, Winchell wrote, “a minister of the gospel held Sunday services within the walls of the forest cathedral [McKinley Grove]; a congregation of twenty-three persons gathered around him.”

Conservation and Forest Management

William Brewer made the first geological examination of the Kings River area in 1864. He warned of dangers of allowing too many animals to graze there. The Dinkey Creek area was particularly vulnerable because it was easily accessible and a prime location.

John Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892 and urged the government to protect the “Range of Light.” In 1893, four million acres of forest in the southern Sierra were set aside as the Sierra Forest Reserve.

The law was supposed to prevent all economic use of Forest Reserve lands. Little changed in practice, however. Cattle, which tend to be less destructive, outnumbered sheep on the Kings River grazing lands by

1900, but heavy use continued. The Department of the Interior directed ranchers to apply for grazing permits in 1902. Enforcement failed for lack of money and staff.

In 1907, the Sierra Forest Reserve became the Sierra National Forest. The Department of Agriculture's Division of Forestry was put in charge. A new policy called for managing instead of preventing use of the forests' many resources – timber, watersheds, grazing ranges, outdoor recreational areas, wildlife and fish.

Roy Booth was an early forest ranger in the Dinkey district. He described building the first Forest Service ranger station there in the spring of 1910. "Supervisor Shinn gave his approval to the construction of a log cabin, and gave us the magnificent appropriation of \$5.00 with which to finance it... Downey and I...hewed the logs, rove our own shakes {and} built our own fireplace...the \$5.00 was spent on nails."

The forest rangers regulated grazing on national forest lands. They issued a limited number of permits. A permit may be transferred when a ranch is sold, if the purchaser can show ability to run herds on government – owned land. The Sample, Simpson, Ross, Weldon, ship and Chambers families have grazed stock on these ranges for generations.

The rangers at Dinkey Creek had other jobs, too. They sowed grass seed and recruited nearby loggers and ranchers to fight forest fires. In the spring, they repaired bridges damaged by winter snow. They even organized campfire entertainment for tourists.

The Automobile And Depression Bring Big Changes

In 1915, a 41-mile road between Fresno and Dinkey Creek brought automobile traffic to the area. In the 1930s, the Depression brought the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers. For \$30.00 a Month or 25 cents an hour, they built roads, trails, campgrounds, ranger stations and fire lookouts. Crews stationed at Oak Flat worked mainly on campgrounds. Those at Rush Creek specialized in road construction. One of these roads was the 6-mile paved route to the McKinley Grove's majestic Sequoias.

Many other area structures were built during the Depression. Of particular significance is the Dinkey Creek Truss Bridge, which was completed in 1938. It was the first "bowstring arch truss" bridge built in California and is one of a handful of wooden truss bridges still standing. Vehicles traveling the McKinley Grove road used the bridge until 1965. Since then it has been open only to foot traffic. Its uniqueness earned the Dinkey Creek Truss Bride a place on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996.

Road construction changed the pattern of intersections. In 1934, therefore the CCC built a new Forest Service ranger station's site in Dinkey Meadow. This more convenient location has helped rangers serve vacationers who have traveled to Dinkey Creek over the past six decades.

More people meant more facilities. The Bluebird Inn opened in the 1930s, was remodeled in the 1950s and now is called the Dinkey Creek Inn. But it takes a bit of imagination to "see" Ducey's Resort, also built in the 1930s. Visitors who take the short road north from the current ranger station will pass through woods to "Trail's End." There a multiple-story hotel stood, flanked by a post office, a store and the Buckhorn Café. Twenty-two cabins nestled nearby. Few traces exist of this once flourishing summer resort.

Logging – A Late Arrival In Dinkey Creek

Early Dinkey Creek residents cut trees to make wood ‘shakes’ for roofing. Many did this work part-time to earn extra money or to finish building their own cabins. In addition, ambitious men spent summers in the area, making up to 2,000 shakes per day. After paying the landowner a dollar per thousand – to a middleman who collected a market price of ten to 12 dollars in Fresno.

Forest Service officials encouraged logging at the turn of the century. But Dinkey Creek's virgin forests weren't cut heavily until the mid-1900s. Adequate roads then made it economical to remove timber from the rugged area. The Pine Logging Camp and Mill opened in 1937, and the Byles-Jamison Mill moved onto Dinkey Creek forestlands in 1940.

The most intensive logging in the area took place in the 1950s. Loggers worked from May until heavy snowfall, sometimes as late as December. There were cabins and a school for children at the Pine Logging Camp. Some of the mill's buildings and machinery exist today, including a burner and a repair shop. Because they are structurally unsound, they are closed to the public. However, the Forest Service is studying ways to preserve this site.

Dinkey Creek-Today

When you visit Dinkey Creek today, you walk the same ground the early Indians traveled. McKinley rove remains a breathtaking cathedral of tall trees. Hikers still must be tough to reach the Kings River high country, navigating terrain so spectacular that it rivals Yosemite.

Frank Dusy is long gone, of course. He died in 1898, at the age of 60 – just after finally making fortune mining gold in Alaska. But the tradition of pack trips he started lives on. Clyde's Outfitter and Pack Station, established in the 1920s, was moved to its present site in 1933, one of several owners. Then it cost \$2.50 a day to rent a horse.

Several barns, corrals and residential structures in Dinkey Meadow are used during grazing operations today. They form a solid connection with Dusy, who sold his ranch to the Simpson family. They converted from sheep to cattle and sold out to the Forbes family in 1950. The city of Fresno spent tax money to erect Camp Fresno in 1926, and to expand it in later years, so city residents could enjoy camping at Dinkey Creek. The YWCA has disbanded Camp Mar-Y-Mac, built in 1949, but girls and young women continue to enjoy Camp El-O-Win, constructed by the Girl Scouts in 1960. Area campgrounds, developed by the CCC and maintained by the Forest Service, are available to the public.

Minerals, grazing land and timber drew early Californians to Dinkey Creek. Under careful management, economic use of natural resources continues. However, recreation has become the area's mainstay. All who enter here have an opportunity to share in Dinkey Creek's fascinating history – and a duty to help preserve its natural wonders for future generations.